

Observations of the rarely seen aerial display of Short-winged Cisticola *Cisticola brachypterus*

Michael S. L. Mills

Observações da parada aérea, raramente observada, da fuinha-d'asa-curta *Cisticola brachypterus*. A fuinha-d'asa-curta *Cisticola brachypterus* realiza uma parada nupcial raramente documentada. Com base em observações feitas no Monte Moco, Angola, apresento a primeira descrição deste comportamento em mais de 50 anos e descrevo pela primeira vez os sons emitidos durante a sua exibição aérea.

Short-winged Cisticola *Cisticola brachypterus* is widespread in the Afrotropics, occurring in mesic savannas throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Urban *et al.* 1997, Hockey *et al.* 2005), including most of the Angolan plateau (Dean 2000). It is often common and many observers will be familiar with a small, plain bird perched atop a tree or bush, uttering its feeble song during the breeding season. What is much less appreciated is that the male, like several other smaller *Cisticola* usually referred to as 'cloud-scrappers', performs a striking aerial display during the breeding season (Lynes 1930; see below).

In February 2012 I was driving through the grasslands at the foot of Mount Moco, Huambo, Angola, when I noticed a small cisticola perform an aerial display. The only small cisticolas recorded at the site are Short-winged, Neddicky *C. fulvicapilla* and Wing-snapping Cisticolas *C. ayresii* (Mills *et al.* 2011), with Zitting Cisticola

C. juncidis found nearby. I was aware of an aerial display only for Wing-snapping Cisticola, which this bird, based on its longer tail, clearly was not. Having watched several displaying birds, I finally managed to observe them perched, and confirmed that they looked and sounded identical to Short-winged Cisticola. As I was unaware of Short-winged Cisticola possessing such a display, I wondered whether the birds might represent a cryptic species. However, a search of the literature revealed a detailed description of Short-winged Cisticola's display, performed at a height of c.60 m and lasting several minutes, based on observations from Kenya to Angola and on birds of several subspecies, including *isabellinus* from near Morogoro, Tanzania, *reichenowi* from near Mombasa, Kenya, *ankole* from Uganda, *brachypterus* from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and *loanda* from Angola (Lynes 1930), whose description merits repeating here:

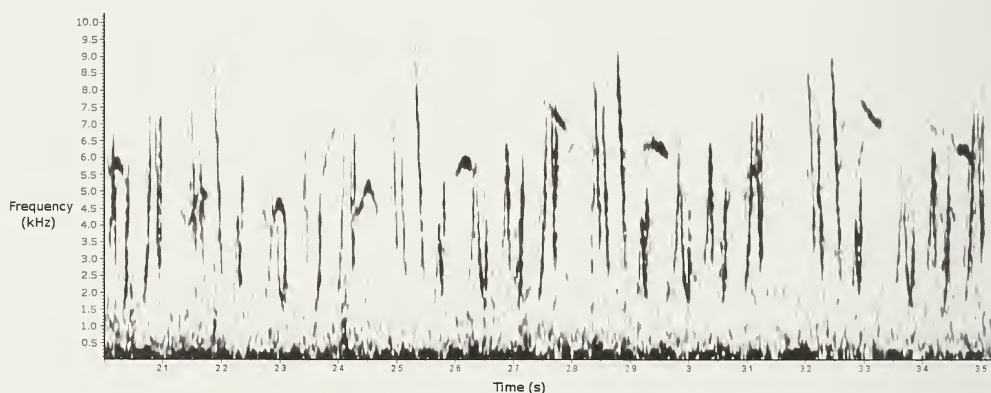


Figure 1. Sonogram drawn from a 1.5-second snippet of the sound made by Short-winged Cisticola *Cisticola brachypterus* during the dive phase of the display flight, recorded at Mount Moco, Angola. The more drawn-out notes at 4.0–5.0 kHz are the background song of another, perched Short-winged Cisticola.

Figura 1. Sonograma retirado de um fragmento de 1.5 segundo do som feito pela fuinha-d'asa-curta *Cisticola brachypterus* durante o mergulho executado durante o seu voo de exibição, gravado no Monte Moco, Angola. As notas mais arrastadas entre 4.0 e 5.0 kHz provêm de outra fuinha-d'asa-curta a cantar pousada mais longe.

'The bird rises, generally if not always from his song-perch, with whirring wings, alternating with momentary breaks and dips in the track, up and up into the air, and then commences to cruise around in circles very like [*Cisticola*] *brunnescens* does, but looking different in the proportionately longer tail being kept slightly expanded and flirited in a loose, disjointed way... On conclusion of the high cruise, comes the thunderbolt dive down nearly to the ground, the upward swerve, once or more repeated, and then the final flop down into the grass just like the Cloud-scrappers. Probably the cruise is accompanied by song, but it must be too feeble for the observer to hear it: we never did, except once during the ascent.'

There appear to be almost no other published first-hand accounts of this display: those of Chapin (1953) and van Someren (1956) are apparently the only ones. Chapin (1953) also relates a fable from the Mangbetu tribe of Oriental Province, north-eastern DRC, in which elephants are said to fear the bird because once, hearing the swish of the descending bird, an elephant raised its trunk. The tiny bird shot down the trunk and pierced the brain, with mortal result to the elephant!

Given the dearth of previous accounts, I summarise my observations here; this general description is based on the behaviour of at least five different individuals giving similar displays comprised of all phases, whereas the duration of the phases is based on one bird that was timed during three display flights. The display has four phases:

[1] Climb: the bird takes off from its perch and climbs to *c.* 50 m above ground over a period of 35–45 seconds (range; *n* = 3 displays from one bird). The climb is usually gradual and in broad circles, but can be more direct.

[2] Cruise: the bird flies in wide circles at the pinnacle of its climb for 10–20 seconds (same three displays). During one display the bird performed a short 'mock dive'. No vocalisations were heard.

[3] Dive: the bird enters a vertical freefall, always accompanied by strange *prrrrttprrrtprtprtprt* noises (see Fig. 1), perhaps made by the wings, during the entire descent. Just before reaching the ground it swerves back up to 5–10 m above ground. This takes *c.* 10 seconds. A few feeble calls were heard (*cf.* the tape-recording at www.birdsangola.org/downloads.htm).

[4] Rocking: the bird flies back and forth a few times for 15–20 seconds at 5–10 m above the ground before landing.

This appears to be the first description of sounds made during aerial displays. It would be interesting to learn whether these displays are made throughout the species' range and whether they are always accompanied by the same sounds, as variations in display could be taxonomically informative.

Acknowledgements

Michael Rogerson and Juliet Mills shared these observations. Alan Tye and Ron Demey kindly reviewed the manuscript. Martim Melo assisted with the Portuguese translations.

References

- Chapin, J. P. 1953. The birds of the Belgian Congo. Part 3. *Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.* 75A: 1–821.
- Dean, W. R. J. 2000. *The Birds of Angola: An Annotated Checklist*. BOU Checklist No. 18. Tring, UK: British Ornithologists' Union.
- Hockey, P. A. R., Dean, W. R. J. & Ryan, P. G. (eds.) 2005. *Roberts—Birds of Southern Africa*. Seventh edn. Cape Town: John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.
- Lynes, H. 1930. Review of the genus *Cisticola*. *Ibis* 6 (Suppl. 12): 1–673.
- Mills, M. S. L., Olmos, F., Melo, M. & Dean, W. R. J. 2011. Mount Moco: its importance to the conservation of Swierstra's Francolin *Pternistis swierstrai* and the Afromontane avifauna of Angola. *Bird Conserv. Intern.* 21: 119–133.
- Urban, E. K., Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 1997. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol. 5. London, UK: Academic Press.
- van Someren, V. G. L. 1956. Days with birds. Studies of habits of some East African species. *Fieldiana Zool.* 38: 1–520.
- A. P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, University of Jos, PO Box 13404, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. E-mail: michael@birdingafrica.com*
- DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa.*

Received 22 May 2013; revision accepted 11 January 2014.